PITTA

Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 13 Number 3 March 2016 (Special Issue)

MOUNTAIN MAGIC

Trip Report – Sattal & Pangot, Uttarakhand, April 2015

Umesh Mani

Tawny Fish Owl (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Four of us – Sudhir Moorti, Anita Negi, Gowthama Poladasu and I – were scheduled to go on a trip to Kerala in mid-April 2015. However, given that intense heat and humidity was expected – a major deterrent – we had been casting about in our minds for an alternate location, when we hit upon Sattal and Pangot. The prospect of cold weather was so alluring that within a few minutes, we had all agreed, and within just a couple of hours, the new program was made, tickets booked, car hire worked out, and we had started upon the task of boning up on the birds of the region!

Red-billed Leiothrix (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Looking back, the decision to go to Sattal and Pangot turned out to be one of the best decisions we have ever made. The region is a birder's paradise, with a checklist of some 300+ species, including several pheasants, thrushes, flycatchers, songbirds, vultures, etc.

Bank Myna (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Long-tailed Broadbill (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Red-billed Blue Magpie (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

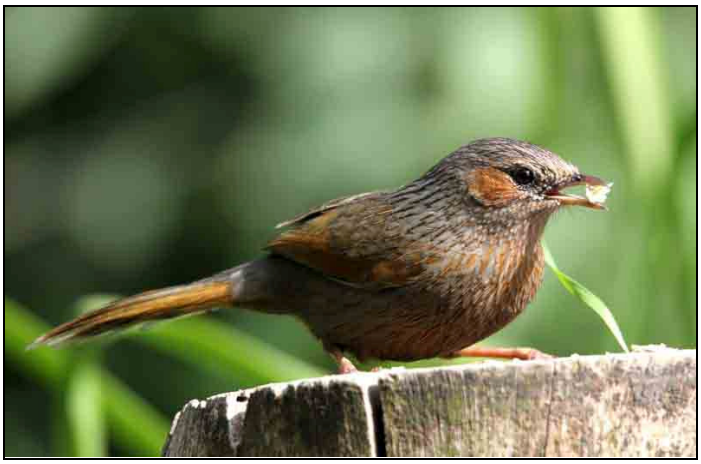
The duration of our trip was around 6 days, and hopes were high that we would be able to see and photograph a good number of that 300+ checklist.

Opinions were divided as to whether we should stay for a few days each at Sattal as well as Pangot, or base ourselves at Sattal and just drive to Pangot on the days earmarked for that region. We decided to take a call on that after reaching Sattal.

As we had hired a car at Delhi and were driving ourselves, we had full freedom and flexibility to stop wherever and whenever we felt like it; this resulted in frequent birding stops en route to Sattal, yielding several lifers like the Bank Myna, River Lapwing, Brown Rock Chat, etc, though also delaying us by several hours! But anyway, since the sightings had been interesting, we were quite happy.

Green-backed Tit (Photo: Umesh Mani)

The accommodation we had fixed up was located somewhere between Sattal and Bhimtal. This worked out to our advantage, since there was plenty of bird life all around – including Green-backed Tits, Himalayan Bulbuls, Oriental Turtle Doves, etc that could be seen on the bushes even through our windows! On the nearby trees, we also saw the Red-billed Blue Magpies; Blue Whistling Thrushes were everywhere, as also House and Russet Sparrows, Grey Bushchats, Grey-hooded Babblers, Streaked Laughingthrushes etc.



Streaked Laughingthrush (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Russet Sparrow (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Black-throated Sunbird (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Blue-winged Siva (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Rufous-bellied Niltava (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Over the next few days, we covered various trails and birding sites near Sattal, including Maheshkhan Forest (where we saw the Rufous-bellied Niltava, Black-headed and Eurasian Jays, and the White-throated Laughingthrush), Dumping Yard (where we saw Himalayan and Eurasian Griffons, and the Steppe Eagle), etc.

But the most incredible experience was at a spot known locally as the Studio, where some logs and twigs across and near a small stream provide birds with convenient perches before they take a dip in the water. At this spot, we were able to see and photograph many beautiful species, including the Mountain Bulbul, Red-billed Leiothrix, Blue-winged Siva, Emerald Dove, and several Flycatchers (Rusty-tailed, Blue-throated, Verditer, Ultramarine, Grey-headed Canary, Asian Paradise and White-throated Fantail). The nearby forest yielded the stunning Long-tailed Broadbill, Maroon Oriole, Brown Bullfinch, Grey-bellied Tesia, Pied and Tickell's Thrushes, Slaty-headed Parakeets, etc.

Some species seem to be seen in fairly restricted patches, e.g. Black-chinned Babbler, Black-throated Sunbird, Striated Prinia, etc - so it is a good idea to use a local guide, since only they would be able to take us to those spots. It is also helpful to listen to and get familiar with the bird calls before the trip, since that could help locate and identify additional species.

Birding along the streams can also be quite profitable – we scored the Slaty-backed and Spotted Forktails, Crested Kingfisher, Brown Dipper, Plumbeous and White-capped Water Redstarts near various streams.

Birding further up at Pangot was more challenging, but also a rewarding experience. Due to the

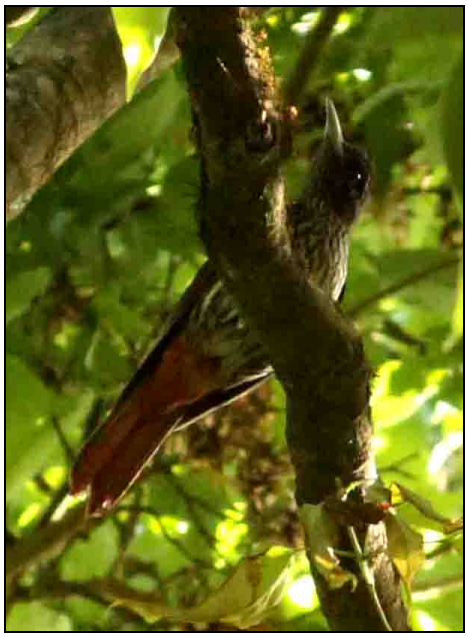
Black-headed Jay (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Eurasian Jay (Photo: Umesh Mani)

White-throated Laughingthrush (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Crimson Sunbird (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

steep inclines, one has perforce to stick to the road while birding. This can be frustrating at times, if the bird activity is on the 'hill' side of the road, since the trees would then be quite high and sighting birds would be difficult. But on the other side – the 'valley' side – of the road, the trees would be at eye level, and birding would be a lot easier. We spent a lot of time praying that the activity would be on this side of the road!



Maroon Oriole (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Pangot has some of the most exotic and enigmatic species, like the Kalij and Koklass Pheasants, Hill Partridge, etc, as well as many other lovely species like the Coal, Fire-capped and Black-lored Tits, White-browed Shrike babbler, White-tailed Nuthatch, Great and Blue-throated Barbets, Whiskered Yuhina, etc.

Whiskered Yuhina (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

White-browed Shrike Babbler
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

Slaty-headed Parakeet
(Photo: Umesh Mani)

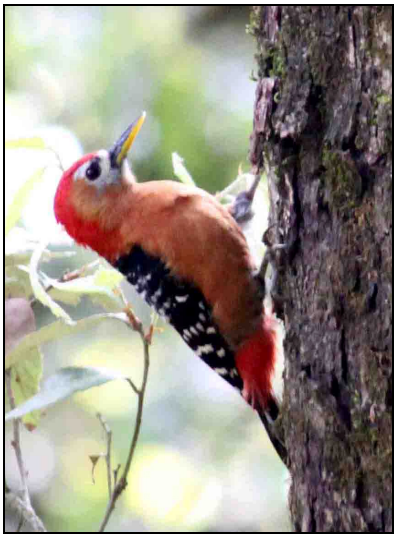
Striated Prinia (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Pied Thrush (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Rusty-tailed Flycatcher (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Blue-throated Flycatcher (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Vinayak (further up from Pangot) is said to be the place to see the Cheer Pheasant (though we spent two mornings there but were not able to see it). However, we did have some compensation in the form of the Mistle Thrush, Rosy and Upland Pipits, etc.

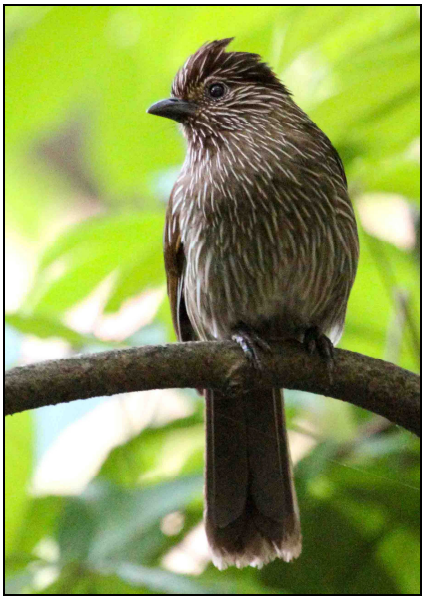


Rufous-bellied Woodpecker
(Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

The trip also yielded a bonanza in terms of Woodpeckers (Himalayan, Rufous-bellied, Brown-fronted, Fulvous-breasted, Greater Yellownape, Greater Flameback and Grey-headed), Owls (Tawny and Brown Fish Owls, Spotted and Asian Barred Owlet), Thrushes (Blue Rock, Chestnut-bellied Rock, Blue-capped Rock, Dark-sided and Orange-headed, beside those already mentioned above) and Warblers (Tickell's and Hume's Leaf, Lemon-rumped, Common Chiffchaff, Whistler's, Greenish, Black-faced, Western Crowned, Golden-spectacled and Pale-footed, besides the Grey-hooded mentioned already).

Mountain Bulbul (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Mistle Thrush (Photo: Umesh Mani)



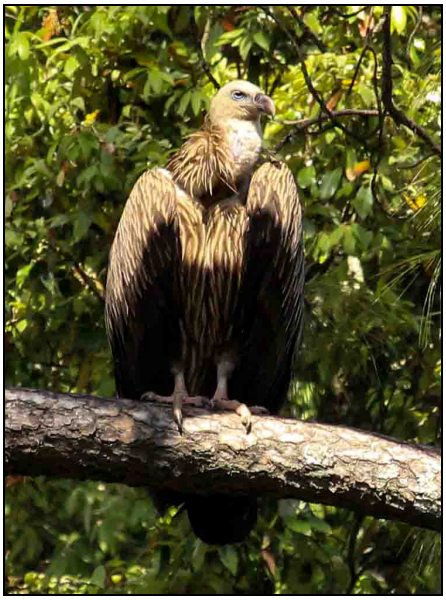
Striated Laughingthrush
(Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

In sum, we returned with 175 species, including 75+ lifers for me personally (some of the other members had nearly 100 lifers!). All in all, a wonderful experience, leaving us desperately wishing for more!

Some more photos taken during the trip:

Spotted Forktail (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Slaty-backed Forktail (Photo: Umesh Mani)



Himalayan Griffon (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Dark-sided Flycatcher (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Grey Bushchat (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Emerald Dove (Photo: Umesh Mani)

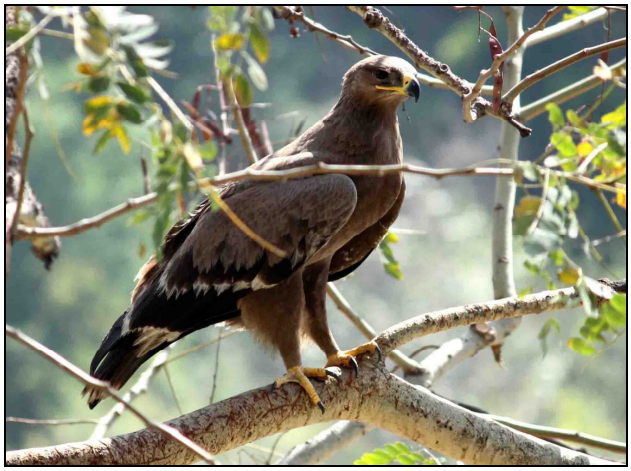
Common Chiffchaff (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Steppe Eagle (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Brown Bullfinch (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Hill Partridge (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Tickell's Thrush (Photo: Umesh Mani)



Tawny Eagle (Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)

Brown Rock Chat (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Asian Barred Owlet (Photo: Umesh Mani)

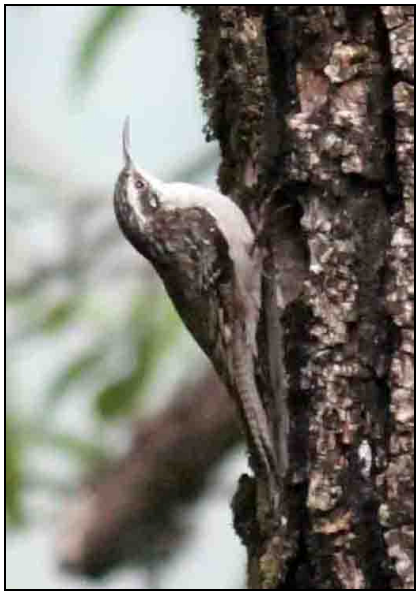
Himalayan Bulbul (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Black Bulbul (Photo: Umesh Mani)

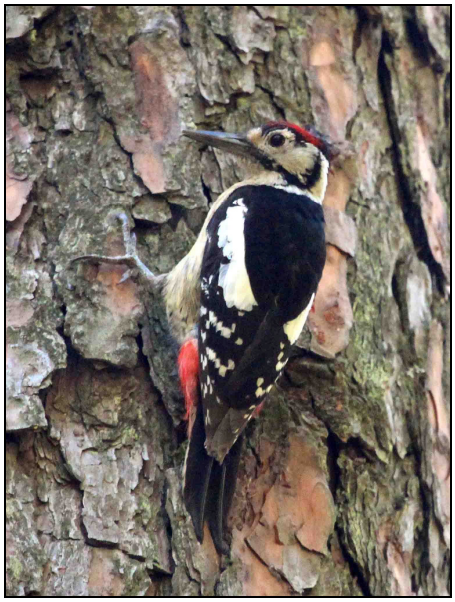
Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Grey Treepie (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler (Photo: Umesh Mani)



Bar-tailed Treecreeper
(Photo: Gowthama Poladasu)



Himalayan Woodpecker (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

River Lapwing (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Ultramarine Flycatcher (Male) (Photo: Sudhir Moorti)

Ultramarine Flycatcher (Female) (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Great Barbet (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Black-faced Warbler (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Spot-winged Tit (Photo: Umesh Mani)

White-tailed Nuthatch (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Black-lored Tit (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Black-throated Tit (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Blue Whistling Thrush (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Kalij Pheasant (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Tickell's Leaf Warbler (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Rufous Sibia (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Plumbeous Water Redstart (Male) (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Plumbeous Water Redstart (Female) (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Western Crowned Warbler (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Eurasian Griffon (Photo: Umesh Mani)

House Sparrow (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Grey-hooded Warbler (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Verditer Flycatcher (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Oriental Turtle Dove (Photo: Umesh Mani)

Complete list of birds seen during the trip:

S. No.	Bird Name	S. No.	Bird Name
1	River Lapwing	29	Dark-sided Thrush
2	Red-wattled Lapwing	30	Pied Thrush
3	Brown Rockchat	31	Mistle Thrush
4	Pied Bushchat	32	Tickell's Thrush
5	Grey Bushchat	33	Blue Whistling Thrush
6	Common Stonechat	34	Orange-headed Thrush (nominate)
7	Red-billed Blue Magpie	35	Striated Laughingthrush
8	Oriental Magpie Robin	36	Streaked Laughingthrush
9	Maroon Oriole	37	Chestnut-crowned Laughingthrush
10	Black-hooded Oriole	38	White-throated Laughingthrush
11	Spotted Dove	39	Grey-winged Blackbird
12	Emerald Dove	40	White-browed Shrike Babbler
13	Oriental Turtle Dove	41	Large Cuckooshrike
14	Eurasian Collared Dove	42	Black-winged Cuckooshrike
15	Blue Rock Pigeon	43	Bar-winged Flycatcher-shrike
16	Wedge-tailed Green Pigeon	44	Jungle Babbler
17	Yellow-footed Green Pigeon	45	Yellow-eyed Babbler
18	Rose-ringed Parakeet	46	Black-chinned Babbler
19	Slaty-headed Parakeet	47	Rusty-cheeked Scimitar Babbler
20	Plum-headed Parakeet	48	Red-billed Leothrix
21	Jungle Myna	49	Rufous Sibia
22	Common Myna	50	Chestnut-bellied Nuthatch
23	Bank Myna	51	White-tailed Nuthatch
24	Chestnut-tailed Starling	52	Bar-tailed Treecreeper
25	Asian Pied Starling	53	Spotted Forktail
26	Blue Rock Thrush	54	Slaty-backed Forktail
27	Chestnut-bellied Rock Thrush	55	Plumbeous Water Redstart
28	Blue-capped Rock Thrush	56	White-capped Water Redstart

S. No.	Bird Name	S. No.	Bird Name
57	Brown Dipper	101	Changeable Hawk Eagle
58	Asian Brown Flycatcher	102	Black Eagle
59	Rusty-tailed Flycatcher	103	Crested Serpent Eagle
60	Dark-sided Flycatcher	104	Shikra
61	Asian Paradise-flycatcher	105	Besra
62	White-throated Fantail	106	Black Kite
63	Ultramarine Flycatcher	107	Black-shouldered Kite
64	Verditer Flycatcher	108	Large-billed Crow
65	Grey-headed Canary Flycatcher	109	Indian Jungle Crow
66	Rufous-bellied Niltava	110	Black-headed Jay
67	Red-vented Bulbul	111	Eurasian Jay
68	Himalayan Bulbul	112	Himalayan Woodpecker
69	Mountain Bulbul	113	Rufous-bellied Woodpecker
70	Black Bulbul	114	Greater Yellownape
71	Rufous Treepie	115	Greater Flameback
72	Grey Treepie	116	Brown-fronted Woodpecker
73	Olive-backed Pipit	117	Fulvous-breasted Woodpecker
74	Upland Pipit	118	Grey-headed Woodpecker
75	Rosy Pipit	119	Common Rosefinch
76	Paddyfied Pipit	120	Brown Bullfinch
77	Blue-winged Siva	121	Eurasian / Common Cuckoo
78	Purple Sunbird	122	Asian Koel
79	Crimson Sunbird	123	Long-tailed Broadbill
80	Black-throated Sunbird	124	Green Sandpiper
81	Great Tit	125	Common Sandpiper
82	Green-backed Tit	126	Great Barbet
83	Black-throated Tit	127	Blue-throated Barbet
84	Spot-winged Tit	128	Coppersmith Barbet
85	Fire-capped Tit	129	Scarlet Minivet
86	Black-lored Tit (nominate)	130	Long-tailed Minivet
87	White-browed Wagtail	131	Oriental White-eye
88	Grey Wagtail	132	Hill Partridge
89	Barn Swallow	133	Black Francolin
90	Red-rumped Swallow	134	Kalij Pheasant
91	Little Swift	135	Koklass Pheasant
92	House Swift	136	Indian Roller
93	Tawny Fish Owl	137	Dollarbird
94	Brown Fish Owl	138	Ruddy Shelduck
95	Asian Barred Owlet	139	House Sparrow
96	Spotted Owlet	140	Russet Sparrow
97	Himalayan Griffon	141	Chestnut-shouldered Petronia
98	Eurasian Griffon	142	Tickell's Leaf Warbler
99	Steppe Eagle	143	Lemon-rumped Warbler
100	Booted Eagle	144	Common Chiffchaff

S. No.	Bird Name	S. No.	Bird Name
145	Whistler's Warbler	160	House Crow
146	Hume's Leaf Warbler	161	Whiskered Yuhina
147	Greenish Warbler	162	Drongo Cuckoo
148	Black-faced Warbler	163	Black Drongo
149	Western Crowned Warbler	164	Ashy Drongo
150	Grey-hooded Warbler	165	Bronzed Drongo
151	Green Crowned Warbler (Golden-spectacled Warbler)	166	Greater Racket-tailed Drongo
		167	Large-tailed Nightjar
152	Pale-footed Bush Warbler	168	Indian Grey Hornbill
153	Grey-bellied Tesia	169	Green Bee-eater
154	Lesser Whitethroat	170	Orange-bellied Leafbird
155	Striated Prinia	171	Cattle Egret
156	Ashy Prinia	172	Little Egret
157	White-throated Kingfisher	173	Intermediate Egret
158	Common Kingfisher	174	Little Cormorant
159	Crested Kingfisher	175	Common Hawk Cuckoo

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